



# **NEWS** *from the National Wildlife Refuge System*

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## **COMMUNITY COALITIONS CARE FOR NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM**

At Felsenthal National Wildlife Refuge in Crossett, Arkansas, a cadre of wildlife enthusiasts from all ages and walks of life are thrashing brush and laying mulch for a hiking trail, creating a canoe route on Lapile Creek, and constructing fishing piers on Eagle Lake pond.

Creating facilities for national wildlife refuges is not unusual--the nation's 511 refuges accommodate 30 million visitors each year who come for wildlife-watching, nature photography, fishing, hunting, and environmental education. But what makes the Felsenthal effort, and others like it across the country, so special is it's being carried out by a group of people who are not on the federal payroll at all.

The Friends of Felsenthal represents a burgeoning nationwide trend in citizens coalitions coming together to help care for the National Wildlife Refuge System, the world's largest and most diverse network of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife.

The 123 non-profit refuge citizens coalitions in existence today not only help establish facilities at national wildlife refuges--they also carry out other visitor programs like environmental education and public tours. Most importantly, they help refuges with vital habitat conservation, wildlife monitoring, and other programs directly benefitting wildlife.

The Friends of Felsenthal, for example, are working with three major timber companies and Northeast Louisiana University on recovery efforts for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Similarly, members of The Friends of Walnut Creek National Wildlife Refuge, near Des Moines, Iowa, are helping the refuge fulfill its primary purpose by restoring the tallgrass prairie.

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**AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES...**  
*Where wildlife comes naturally!*

Whether they call themselves “Friends” groups, cooperating associations, or Refuge Keepers, the genesis and success of these refuge coalitions is underscored by the dedication and commitment to wildlife embodied by member citizens. The groups’ efforts are bolstered by a longstanding partnership among the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency responsible for managing the 92-million-acre Refuge System, and the National Wildlife Refuge Association, the National Audubon Society, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

These organizations are now redoubling their efforts by launching a national “Friends Initiative” to offer mentoring, training, funding, and networking opportunities to establish and strengthen community coalitions for the Refuge System. The effort is reinforced by provisions of a 1995 Executive Order on the National Wildlife Refuge System and The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. The National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Act of 1997, currently under consideration in the U.S. House of Representatives, would also boost this effort.

“Friends groups have a unique ability to energize national wildlife refuge programs at the local level where they really have an impact on wildlife conservation,” said Jamie Rappaport Clark, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “Their contributions are absolutely key to the success of the National Wildlife Refuge System because they jumpstart programs, fill in the gaps where our limited resources can’t meet wildlife or public recreation needs, and serve as refuge advocates in the surrounding community.”

Members of Friends groups agree. “We’ve reached a point in time where a public agency can’t manage a block of land in isolation from its community,” says Ann Haines, executive director of the nearly 500-member Friends of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge just outside the Twin Cities. “There has to be an entity to educate and mobilize the community.”

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At Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge in West Volusia, Florida, the Lake Woodruff Audubon Refuge Keepers are building a 20-foot observation tower on the refuge. The refuge is so flat, explains Kathy Barnard, a nurse and secretary of the local Audubon chapter, that a 20-foot tower will provide visibility like a skyscraper. Barnard recalls, "I told the refuge manager to think pie-in-the-sky, and he said, 'What about a tower?' It's a \$10,000 project. I told him he'd call the shots, we'd just make it happen. We're about halfway there."

Across the country at the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, one of the oldest and perhaps the largest refuge citizens coalitions with 2,200 members, is gearing up for the 25th anniversary of the refuge's establishment. Intense interest by this corps of concerned citizens over the years led to the refuge's expansion from 23,000 to 43,000 acres, protecting the Bay's drastically dwindling wetlands habitat for migratory birds and endangered species.

At J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island in Florida, the 800-member "Ding" Darling Wildlife Society runs a bookstore and uses the proceeds primarily for environmental education on the refuge, including launching a new refuge visitor center. But the group also stands ready to help Refuge Manager Lou Hinds on a host of wildlife conservation efforts when limited resources make projects prohibitive. For example, the group barged a bulldozer out to the island when refuge staff needed to clear exotic plants from the island to make way for nesting birds.

"Friends groups give you not just monetary support but emotional support, too," says Hinds. "When you can talk one-on-one with each other and reach an understanding, they're there to support you before the town council or the county commissioners. That's a huge help to a manager."

Says Glenn Carowan, manager of Maryland's Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge, "I am a much more effective manager when I have an important issue and I can go to The Friends of Blackwater, get their buy-in, and have 150 of their soldiers going into the public arena to create understanding."

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Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge recently hosted a delegation of Russian biologists who came to the United States to observe various approaches to wildlife conservation and management. What impressed them the most, however, according to Frank Wolff, a retired school administrator and president of the 230-member Friends of Blackwater, was the network of citizens who had united on behalf of the refuge.

Beverly Heinze-Lacey, a volunteer and board member of the 300-member Friends of Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Newburyport, Massachusetts, is part of a training team organized by the National Wildlife Refuge Association to jumpstart new citizens coalitions across the country. "In my workshops, I meet with interested citizens and refuge staff and ask each group to list what they'd like to see done on the refuge," she says. "I'm always happy to see how much correlation there is between what refuge staff wants and what the public wants."

"What 'Friends' groups and refuge managers have in common is their willingness to dedicate themselves to their wildlife conservation cause," said Service Director Clark. "Working together, they can take this dedication a step further by advancing public awareness and respect for the beauty and values of the National Wildlife Refuge System."